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Problem Behaviour of Pupils with Specific Learning Disabilities in Teachers' Reflections

Abstract

The research aimed to find out the manifestations and rate of occurrence of problem behaviour among pupils with specific developmental learning disabilities in teachers' reflections. Differences in the rate of occurrence of pupils' problem behaviour were compared with regard to their current level of education, position in the class, and academic achievement. Data were gathered by content analysis of text documents – pupil pedagogical profiles including the Conners Rating Scale for teachers (1969, 1999). Data were processed by SPSS, the method of statistical inference, Mann-Whitney U-test, and Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance. A variability of SLD pupils' behaviours was discovered. The most pronounced manifestations included internalising problem behaviours; externalising problem behaviours were mostly disruptive and inattentive behaviours. SLD pupils with poor academic achievement were characterised by significantly more frequent manifestations of problem behaviour.

Keywords: *problem behaviour, pupil with a specific developmental learning disability*

Introduction

The specific developmental learning disability does not only cause the child difficulties related to school performance requirements. It reaches far deeper into the personal and social level of the pupil's personality, with learning difficulties not infrequently becoming the "gateway" to the "problem pupil" category.

The potential threats resulting from such a disability extend even into adulthood. The relationship between dyslexia and criminality in adulthood has been confirmed repeatedly (Macdonald, 2012; Selenius et al., 2011; Grigorenko, 2006; Kirk & Reid, 2001). Czech research revealed a high portion of dyslexics (34%) among persons serving a prison sentence, while the researchers interviewing the prisoners learnt about their hurtful experiences in school years, which, among other things, had motivated them to leave school early (Kejřová & Krejčová, 2015). Similarly, the Norwegian study by Kirk & Reid (2001) showed a high representation of persons with dyslexia (50%) among young offenders. A survey carried out in Great Britain identified the excessive presence of dyslexic individuals among the homeless while finding out that homeless dyslexics had more frequent problems with addictions and mental health and were more susceptible to self-harm and suicide (Macdonald et al., 2016). Yates (2013) also confirmed a large number of dyslexics among a drug-treatment-seeking population (40%) and that they exhibited more severe problem behaviour than non-dyslexic drug users. However, in our text below, we shall return to the school years of pupils with learning disabilities to record the beginnings of their problem behaviours.

Theoretical Background

The learning disability appears to be a predisposing factor for disharmonious personality development. In the context of the learning disability, reading and writing difficulties are risk factors for school failure. According to Ryan (2004), dyslexic children experience persistent frustration at their inability to meet performance expectations related to the fulfilment of school duties, the pain of failing, anger and anxiety, while the same may be sources of outward-directed problem behaviour. The repeated failure reflects in the child's self-image. According to the research by Humphrey and Mullins (2004), dyslexia has marked effects on self-concept and self-esteem, with adverse effects more apparent in the pupils attending mainstream schools. Their research also revealed that many dyslexic pupils felt isolated and excluded at school; some were even bullied. Although a large part of dyslexic children has been clinically and research-confirmed low self-esteem, research has also concluded that healthy and stable social relationships with peers, parents, and teachers help to maintain a high level of self-esteem also in dyslexic children (Shehu et al., 2015; Glazzard, 2010; Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars, 2000).

Many researchers confirm the relationship between pupils' specific learning disabilities and the increased occurrence of their problem behaviour (Heiervang et

al., 2001; Arnold et al., 2005; Mai, 2010; Dahle & Knivsberg, 2013; Yari et al., 2013; Zakopoulou et al., 2018; Rachmawati, 2019). In a primary school for pupils with learning disabilities, Zakopoulou et al. (2018) found that such pupils more frequently committed disciplinary offences, disrupted classes, received comments from teachers, and were often summoned by school head teachers for disciplinary offences. Based on older research, Klasen (1971) defined four categories of dyslexic children's problem behaviour. The first group included pupils with defence and avoidance mechanisms, refusing cooperation, losing notebooks, and counterfeiting signatures; the second category consisted of pupils with compensation mechanisms, including boasting and showing off; the other group consisted of pupils with aggressive and hostile behaviours. She marked the category of intrapersonal problem behaviour as extra dangerous, consisting of pupils characterised by feelings of inferiority, instability, fearfulness, tearfulness, withdrawal, and neurotic symptoms. As to the severity of problem behaviour, it should be noted that the problems with the discipline of pupils with learning disabilities tend to increase with the age of the child (Devaraj et al., 2009).

Research Methodology

Our research aimed to discover the manifestations and rate of occurrence of problem behaviour among pupils with specific developmental learning disabilities (hereinafter referred to as SLD) in reflections of class teachers. We investigated whether SLD pupils differed in the rate of problem behaviour occurrence with regard to their current level of education, position in the class, and academic achievement. Based on that, the following research questions were asked:

- Are there differences in SLD pupils in the rate of problem behaviours with regard to their *current level of education*?*
- Are there differences in SLD pupils in the rate of problem behaviours with regard to their *position in the class*?*
- Are there differences in SLD pupils in the rate of problem behaviours with regard to their *academic achievement*?*

The content analysis of text documents was chosen as the *data gathering method*, particularly the pedagogical profile of the SLD pupil. It is an assessment questionnaire filled in by the class teacher as part of the pupil documentation maintained by the school counselling facility (or by the special school pedagogue in cooperation with the class teacher). Part of the assessment questionnaire includes a modified Connors Rating Scale for teachers (CTQ) (Connors, 1969; 1999) – one of the most

frequently used tools for the assessment of children's problem behaviour at school (Purpura & Lonigan, 2009). The data gathered were processed in the SPSS. At the level of statistical inference, non-parametric tests were used due to the nature of the variables (criterion of normal distribution)¹, i.e., the Mann-Whitney U-test and the Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance.

The *research sample* included n = 39 pedagogical profiles (including the Conners Rating Scale for teachers) of SLD-diagnosed pupils at the first and second levels of selected elementary schools. They were pupils' profiles registered at the Centre of Special Pedagogy Counselling in Rajec. The criterion for including pedagogical profiles in the analyses was the diagnosed SLD, whereas pedagogical profiles of pupils with associated ADHD or other diagnoses with possible distorting effects on the external picture of problem behaviours were excluded. The selection criteria considerably limited the sample size; excluded were mostly profiles of pupils with SLD in comorbidity with ADHD.

Research Results

Description: Various symptoms of problem behaviour occur together in certain groups. In sorting such symptoms, two dimensions were differentiated, i.e., symptoms directed outward – externalising behaviour and symptoms directed inward – internalising behaviour. Externalising behaviours observed by class teachers of SLD pupils included relatively frequent disruptive and inattentive behaviour, this *restlessness* (40%), *fidgeting* (30.7%), *disturbing schoolmates* (30.8%) or *provoking them* (38.5%), *inattention* (66.7%), *failure to finish schoolwork* (53.9%), “*dreaminess*” (52.7%). Teachers reported that they were also easily *influenced by schoolmates* (69.3%) and sometimes *preferred solitude* (25%). The behaviour of a SLD pupil in relation to the teacher was often reported as *demanding the teacher's attention* (21.9%), characterised by *stubbornness* (20.5%) or, on the contrary, *submissiveness* (38.5%). Behaviour in terms of severe violation of social norms (e.g., destructiveness, theft, truancy) rarely occurred in our research sample.

The other identified category of problem behaviour encompassed internalising behaviour², which teachers of SLD pupils reflected strongly. They described SLD

¹ The variables, in particular the values of the variable Scores of Externalising PB did not fulfill the criterion for normal distribution: the values of kurtosis and skewness coefficients were higher than 1 (2.469; 7.623).

² Characterised by social withdrawal, fear, anxiety, or sadness (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001).

pupils as *sensitive to criticism* (70.8%), *timid* (59%), *sad* (43.6%), *easily frightened* (35.6%), or *submissive* (38.5%).

Since the problem behaviour of SLD pupils tends to increase with age (Devaraj et al., 2009; Arnold et al., 2005), we asked whether there were differences in the occurrence of SLD pupils' problem behaviour with regard to their *current level of education*.

Description: The indicator of the variable externalising problem behaviours (hereinafter referred to as PB) was the *score of externalising PB* [N = 39; AM = 17.4; R = 23 (min. 14 – max. 37); SE = 4.7]. The indicator of the variable internalising problem behaviours was the *score of internalising PB* [N = 39; AM = 8.2; R = 10 (min. 5 – max. 15); SE = 2.8].

Table 1. Problem behaviours in SLD pupils with regard to their level of education

	Group	N	AM	Mean rank	U-test	P
Scores of externalising PB	First level	24	16.7	18.73	149.5	p>0.05 0.371
	Second level	15	18.5	22.03		
Scores of internalising PB	First level	24	7.8	19.08	158.0	p>0.05 0.522
	Second level	15	8.8	21.47		

Legend: PB = problem behaviours

Inference: The obtained value of significance in both measurements (externalising and internalising PB in relation to the current level of education) was higher than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). We state that there were no statistically significant differences in problem behaviours between SLD pupils at the first and second levels of education. Although the differences in the data did not reach significance, at the description level, we recorded tendencies to a more frequent occurrence of problem behaviour in SLD pupils at the second level. Compared with SLD pupils at the first level, SLD pupils at the second level had higher mean values and a higher value of the mean rank of PB scores.

The more pronounced problem behaviour of SLD children may be related to their unfavourable position in the class (Humphrey & Mullins, 2004). We asked whether there were differences between SLD children in the rate of problem behaviour occurrence with regard to their *position in the class*. Categories of pupils represented pupils with good positions (N = 31) and excluded pupils (N = 8).

Table 2. Problem behaviours in SLD pupils with regard to their position in the class

Group		N	AM	Mean rank	U-test	P
Scores of externalising PB	Good position in the class	31	17.2	19.02	93.5	p>0.05 0.281
	Excluded	8	18.3	23.81		
Scores of internalising PB	Good position in the class	31	8.0	19.26	101.0	p>0.05 0.420
	Excluded	8	9.0	22.86		

Legend: PB = problem behaviours

Inference: The obtained value of significance in both measurements (externalising and internalising PB in relation to pupils' positions in the class) was higher than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). No significant differences were recorded in the occurrence of problem behaviour with regard to pupils' positions in the class. However, such a tendency was recorded at the level of description. SLD pupils not sufficiently accepted by their schoolmates produced higher values of the mean rank and mean scores of PB compared with pupils with good positions in the class.

The reasons given for the problem behaviour of SLD pupils are usually their lack of ability to meet the performance expectations set by the school (Ryan, 2004; Fischbach et al., 2010). The success rate of meeting the pupil performance expectations set by the school can be observed by means of academic achievement. We asked whether there were differences between SLD children in the rate of problem behaviour with regard to their *school achievement*. The indicator of the achievement was the end-year evaluation in the subjects Slovak Language and Mathematics. Based on the mean value, the sample was divided into the categories: pupils with good achievement (≥ 2), slightly poorer achievement ($= 2.5$), and poor achievement (≤ 3).

Table 3. Problem behaviours in SLD pupils with regard to their academic achievement

Group		N	AM	Mean rank	χ^2	P
Scores of externalising PB	Good academic achievement	8	16.6	15.0	0.280	p>0.05 0.869
	Slightly poorer academic achievement	16	18.6	15.88		
	Poor academic achievement	7	20.1	17.43		
Scores of internalising PB	Good academic achievement	18	7.1	16.5	8.21	p<0.05* 0.016*
	Slightly poorer academic achievement	16	6.9	12.3		
	Poor academic achievement	7	10.9	23.93		

Legend: PB = problem behaviours

Inference: The relationship between internalising PB scores and academic achievement was statistically significant. The Kruskal-Wallis test value equalled 8.21, and the significance was lower than 0.05 [$\chi^2 = 8.21$; $p < 0.05$ ($p = < 0.016^*$)]. SLD pupils with poor achievement produced statistically higher mean values of scores of internalising PB than pupils with better academic achievement. No significant differences were found in the relationship with externalising behaviours. Albeit a non-significant relationship, the values of the mean rank or arithmetic mean showed a tendency for the values of the externalising PB to increase along with the achievement getting worse.

Discussion

Specific learning difficulties of SLD children are a significant factor in their academic failure, which may adversely reflect in their problematic development. Research confirms the relationship between specific learning disabilities and problem behaviour (Heiervang et al., 2001; Mai, 2010; Dahle & Knivsberg, 2013; Yari et al., 2013; Zakopoulou et al., 2018; Rachmawati, 2019). When analysing the documentation of SLD pupils, we observed a large variability in their problem behaviours and identified externalising and internalising symptoms of PB. Externalising symptoms included mostly various disruptive behaviours and inattention. A large group of SLD pupils also displayed internalising behaviours, which Klasen (1971) marked as particularly dangerous. In their research, Norwegian authors Dajhle and Knivsberg (2013) identified similar categories of dyslexic children's problem behaviour.

Problem behaviour of the severe norm violation type was rarely recorded in our research sample. The reason may be that a larger portion of the research sample consisted of pupils attending the first level of elementary school, with the hurtful experience from school years not yet carved into deeper structures of their personalities. Problem behaviour in pupils with learning disabilities tends to increase with age (Devaraj et al., 2009; Arnold et al., 2005). Although our measurements did not confirm significant differences between age groups, through the mean values of the PB scores, we captured a tendency to a slight increase in problem behaviour in pupils attending the second level. However, it should be considered that an increase in risk behaviour during the teenage years is also characteristic of the intact population. Thus, it may not be the effect of learning disabilities.

SLD pupils usually hold unattractive positions in the class; according to the research by Humphrey and Mullins (2004), several children with learning disabilities felt isolated and excluded at school, whereas such a position may support the devel-

opment of their problem behaviour. Although our research did not reveal significant differences between SLD pupils regarding their positions in the class, the measured mean PB values indicated a tendency to increase both types of problem behaviour in excluded pupils.

Problem behaviour is often explained by children's academic failures and inability to meet academic performance expectations (Ryan, 2004). Our measurement confirmed the above assumptions. There were significant differences in the dimension of internalising PB: SLD pupils with poor academic achievement compared with better-achieving pupils were characterised by significantly higher scores of internalising PB. Differences in externalising behaviours were not significant, although a tendency to increase in poorly achieving pupils was recorded at the level of description.

The importance of our study can be seen in the application of the acquired knowledge in the activities of the professional and teaching staff in schools – mostly school special pedagogues and social pedagogues, educational counsellors and prevention coordinators in our current school practice. Our work points to the necessity to deal intensely with SLD pupils' academic performance but also with their problems of socio-emotional character. As indicated by researchers, healthy, stable, supporting relationships with peers, parents, and teachers are the keys to SLD pupils getting through the school years successfully; they help children with learning disabilities maintain reasonable self-esteem (Shehu et al., 2015; Hellendoorn & Ruijsenaars 2000; Singer, 2008; Carawan et al., 2016). The task of the educational counselling staff is to help establish and maintain healthy supportive relationships in the class and co-operate with pupils' parents in a consulting capacity; assist the parental approach characterised by emotional warmth, understanding and support because such an approach has a potential for prevention of children's undesired behaviour (Kompirović et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The research devoted to the relationship between learning disabilities and problem behaviour points to the importance of dealing with the socio-emotional difficulties of children with learning disabilities. Our results indicate variability of problem behaviours of SLD pupils. Academic failure is a significant co-acting factor. The inability of a pupil to meet performance expectations and insufficient support from their important social environment appear to be particular risk factors for disharmonious personality development. A targeted intervention should not be limited to the performance component of school success but also reflect the

social and emotional consequences of the disability. Recommendations for further research are closely related to the limitations of our research. We are aware of the limitations resulting from the generalisation of the conclusions due to the research sample size; however, we were limited by the availability of participants with SLD without comorbidity with ADHD or other disabilities. We perceive that further research would particularly benefit from an extended research sample, also by secondary school students, allowing more effective observation of the problem behaviour development over time.

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